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## Student-Centered Teaching Approaches and Pupils' Active Classroom Participation at Busilac Elementary School

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### Abstract

*Student-centered teaching has been widely promoted in basic education as a means of improving participation, motivation, and learning quality. However, fewer studies document how student-centered approaches are enacted in everyday elementary classrooms and how pupils themselves experience "active participation" beyond simple compliance. This qualitative case study examined the student-centered teaching approaches used at Busilac Elementary School and analyzed how these practices shaped pupils' active classroom participation across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Data were gathered through classroom observations, focus group discussions with pupils, and semi-structured interviews with teachers, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate that dialogic instruction, structured learner autonomy, cooperative learning routines, and formative scaffolding collectively strengthened pupils' participation by increasing willingness to speak, sustaining on-task behavior, and supporting reflective thinking. The study also identifies implementation tensions, including time constraints, uneven group participation, and decision fatigue among pupils when choices were insufficiently structured. Implications highlight the need to design student-centered instruction with clear participation structures, equitable group accountability, and feedback routines that support pupils' confidence and persistence.*

**Keywords:** *student-centered teaching; active participation; elementary education; classroom engagement; qualitative case study*

## Introduction

Active classroom participation is a key concern in elementary education because early participation habits influence pupils' confidence, motivation, and long-term engagement with schooling. Pupils who regularly contribute by asking questions, expressing ideas, collaborating with peers, and persisting in tasks—tend to develop stronger academic self-beliefs and learning strategies, while those who remain silent or disengaged may gradually withdraw from classroom learning opportunities. Yet, in many classrooms, participation is still understood narrowly as answering teacher questions, reciting correct responses, or staying quiet and compliant. Such “participation” can obscure whether pupils are genuinely thinking, interacting, and constructing understanding.

Student-centered teaching offers a practical and theoretical framework for broadening participation in elementary classrooms. Grounded in constructivist and sociocultural perspectives, student-centered approaches emphasize active meaning-making, dialogue, collaboration, relevance, and learner agency (Vygotsky, 1978; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). In this view, teachers design environments where pupils can contribute ideas, make decisions within boundaries, and learn through guided interaction, rather than primarily receiving information. Evidence suggests that student-centered strategies such as dialogic teaching, cooperative learning, and formative feedback are associated with stronger engagement and deeper learning (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

In Philippine elementary contexts, learner-centered and inclusive teaching is frequently encouraged in reform discourses, yet implementation varies due to class size, time pressure, and resource constraints. Empirical research that captures how teachers enact student-centered approaches and how pupils experience participation within these approaches remains needed, especially in public elementary school settings. This study addresses this gap by examining student-centered teaching approaches at Busilac Elementary School and analyzing how these approaches translate into pupils' active classroom participation.

## Research Questions

1. What student-centered teaching approaches are enacted in classrooms at Busilac Elementary School?
2. How do pupils describe and experience “active participation” in student-centered lessons?
3. In what ways do student-centered practices shape pupils' participation behavior and learning engagement?

## Review of Related Literature

Student-centered teaching shifts classroom emphasis from teacher delivery to learner participation, voice, and responsibility. Weimer (2013) argues that learner-centered teaching involves changes in classroom power relations, the role of content, the teacher's role as facilitator, and the purpose of assessment. In elementary settings, student-centered instruction often takes the form of structured discussions, inquiry tasks, cooperative learning, and differentiated outputs that allow pupils multiple ways to demonstrate understanding. Meta-analytic and synthesis work suggests that active learning approaches can improve learning outcomes compared with purely lecture-based formats, especially when tasks require participation and feedback (Prince, 2004).

Participation is closely tied to the broader construct of engagement, commonly conceptualized as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioral engagement includes observable participation (e.g., asking questions, contributing ideas, staying on-task). Emotional engagement reflects interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging. Cognitive engagement involves effortful thinking, persistence, and strategy use. Research shows teacher support, autonomy support, and positive classroom relationships influence participation and engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wentzel, 2012).

Dialogic teaching positions classroom talk as a tool for thinking and learning, with evidence that it supports participation and conceptual understanding by validating learners' contributions (Alexander, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2012). Cooperative learning research indicates that structured group roles and positive interdependence can sustain participation and improve learning, though unequal participation is a known challenge without accountability structures (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Gillies, 2016). Scaffolding—through modeling, prompts, and feedback—supports participation by reducing cognitive barriers and encouraging learners to persist while gradually increasing independence (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine student-centered teaching approaches and pupils' active classroom participation within a real-life elementary school context (Yin, 2018). The research was conducted at Busilac Elementary School, a public elementary school serving pupils from varied socio-economic backgrounds. Participants included five elementary teachers who regularly implemented student-centered strategies and twenty-eight pupils from Grades 4 to 6 selected through purposive sampling to represent varied participation patterns (e.g., active speakers, occasional contributors, and typically quiet pupils) and varied academic performance.

Data were collected over one academic term through multiple qualitative methods. Non-participant classroom observations documented teaching approaches, participation structures, teacher-pupil interactions, and pupil participation behaviors during lessons. Focus group discussions with pupils explored their experiences of participation, comfort in speaking, group work dynamics, and perceptions of teacher support. Semi-structured interviews with teachers examined instructional intentions, participation challenges, and strategies for encouraging inclusion and active learning. All data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of data sources, peer debriefing, and member checking. Ethical approval was secured; informed consent and pupil assent were obtained; and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality.

## Results and Findings

Analysis yielded four interrelated themes describing how student-centered teaching approaches shaped pupils' active classroom participation.

### Theme 1: Dialogic Teaching Expanded Participation Beyond Recitation

Classroom observations showed that teachers consistently used open-ended questions, guided discussion, and storytelling to encourage pupils to explain thinking and connect lessons to lived experiences. Rather than asking only "right-answer" questions, teachers used prompts such as "Why do you think so?" and "Can you give an example?" This shifted participation from recitation to sense-making. Pupils were observed volunteering ideas more frequently, asking follow-up questions, and responding to classmates' contributions. Importantly, dialogue also created space for quieter pupils to participate in shorter, lower-risk ways (e.g., adding a simple example or agreeing/disagreeing with reasons).

#### Participant responses.

One pupil explained, "*Mas ganado ako kapag tinatanong kami at puwede naming ipaliwanag.*" Another shared, "*Hindi ako masyadong natatakot sumagot kasi may follow-up na tanong, hindi agad mali.*" A teacher noted, "*Kapag nakikinig ka sa dahilan nila, mas nagiging confident silang magsalita.*"

These findings suggest that dialogic instruction broadened participation by legitimizing pupils' ideas and treating talk as a tool for learning. This aligns with sociocultural theory emphasizing learning through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) and with research on dialogic teaching showing improved participation and understanding when learners are invited to reason aloud and build on each other's ideas (Alexander, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2012).

### Theme 2: Structured Autonomy Increased Confidence and Willingness to Participate

Teachers provided opportunities for choice in examples, task roles, and output formats (e.g., written response, drawing, oral explanation, or short group presentation). Observations showed that pupils became more willing to participate when they could select approaches aligned with their strengths. However, autonomy was most productive when choices were structured (limited options, clear criteria, and teacher check-ins). When choices were too open-ended, some pupils hesitated and participation slowed.

#### Participant responses

A pupil said, "*Mas masaya kapag may choice parang kaya ko.*" Another admitted, "*Minsan nalilito ako kapag hindi ko alam alin ang tama sa pagpili.*" A teacher emphasized, "*Choice is good, pero kailangan guided kung hindi,*

*natatakot sila magkamali."*

These findings indicate that autonomy supported emotional readiness to participate by increasing pupils' sense of ownership and competence, consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and autonomy-supportive teaching research (Reeve, 2013). The observed need for structure aligns with evidence that autonomy is most effective when paired with clear expectations and guidance rather than "hands-off" independence.

### **Theme 3: Cooperative Learning Sustained Participation Through Peer Support, But Required Accountability**

Group work was frequently used for problem-solving, discussion, and product creation. Pupils were observed sustaining participation longer in groups than in individual seatwork, especially when tasks were challenging. Peer explanation and encouragement enabled some pupils to speak who were less likely to participate in whole-class discussion. However, unequal participation emerged in several groups, with some pupils dominating while others stayed passive unless roles and accountability were explicit.

#### **Participant responses**

One pupil shared, *"Mas naiintindihan ko kapag may nagpapaliwanag na kaklase."* Another noted, *"Mas confident ako sa group kasi may kasama."* Yet a pupil also complained, *"May groupmate na hindi gumagawa, kami lang."* A teacher explained, *"Kapag walang roles, may 'free rider.' Kaya nilalagyan ko ng tagapagsalita, tagasulat, at tagabantay ng oras."*

These findings suggest cooperative learning sustained participation by distributing cognitive and emotional support across peers, consistent with cooperative learning research emphasizing positive interdependence and social accountability (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). The challenge of unequal participation aligns with research showing that structured roles and teacher facilitation improve equitable participation and group productivity (Gillies, 2016).

### **Theme 4: Formative Scaffolding and Feedback Deepened Participation Into Cognitive Engagement**

Teachers used modeling, guided practice, probing questions, and feedback focused on process rather than simply correctness. Observations showed that pupils participated more meaningfully when teachers normalized error as part of learning and asked pupils to explain revisions. Instead of immediately giving answers, teachers used prompts such as "Try again using a different strategy" or "What evidence supports your answer?" This encouraged pupils to persist, revise, and articulate reasoning.

#### **Participant responses.**

A pupil stated, *"Mas natututo ako kapag sinasabi kung saan ako nagkamali."* Another added, *"Kapag pinapakita ng teacher ang steps, mas kaya kong sumagot."* A teacher said, *"Hindi ko binibigay agad ang sagot tinatanong ko paano nila naisip para matuto silang mag-isip."*

These findings indicate that scaffolding transformed participation from surface-level responses into deeper cognitive engagement, consistent with guided learning perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978) and research emphasizing the role of scaffolding in maintaining cognitive demand in learner-centered environments (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). The emphasis on process-focused feedback aligns with evidence that feedback is most effective when it clarifies goals, supports strategy improvement, and guides next steps (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

### **Discussion**

Across themes, the study shows that student-centered teaching at Busilac Elementary School translated teaching practices into active participation by building participation structures that were behavioral (talk and action), emotional (confidence and willingness), and cognitive (reasoning and persistence). Dialogic teaching expanded participation beyond recitation by treating pupils' explanations as valuable, aligning with scholarship on talk for learning (Alexander, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2012). Structured autonomy increased pupils' emotional readiness to participate by promoting ownership and competence, consistent with motivation research (Deci & Ryan, 2000;

Reeve, 2013). Cooperative learning sustained participation via peer support but required roles and accountability to prevent uneven contribution, reflecting established cooperative learning evidence (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Gillies, 2016). Finally, scaffolding and formative feedback deepened participation into cognitive engagement by encouraging strategy use and reflection (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

At the same time, the findings reveal tensions that shape implementation. Time constraints limited extended dialogue and individualized feedback, and group work sometimes produced unequal participation. These challenges reinforce arguments that learner-centered reforms require contextual adaptation, teacher preparation, and classroom management structures that protect equity and learning time (Schweisfurth, 2013). Overall, student-centered approaches were most effective when flexibility was paired with clear structure structured talk, structured choice, structured collaboration, and structured feedback.

## Conclusions and Implications

This qualitative case study provides evidence that student-centered teaching approaches at Busilac Elementary School strengthened pupils' active classroom participation by positioning pupils as speakers, collaborators, decision-makers, and reflective learners. Participation was strongest when dialogic teaching, structured autonomy, cooperative learning routines, and formative scaffolding were intentionally aligned.

**Implications for practice.** Teachers may enhance active participation by: (a) using open-ended questions and follow-up prompts to normalize reasoning talk; (b) providing structured choices with clear criteria; (c) designing group work with explicit roles and participation checks; and (d) using process-focused feedback that supports revision and persistence.

**Implications for school leadership.** Instructional leaders can support student-centered participation by protecting collaborative planning time, providing coaching on discourse and cooperative learning structures, and ensuring reasonable class routines and materials that enable hands-on, interactive learning.

**Directions for future research.** Future studies may use mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to examine how sustained student-centered participation influences achievement, self-efficacy, and attendance. Comparative studies across schools may also identify which participation structures are most resilient under varying class sizes and resource conditions.

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